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SUBJECT: ARMENIA CELEBRATES NATO WEEK (WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM ITS FRIENDS)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) Embassy Yerevan provided key support to ensure that Armenia's first "NATO Week," held March 12-16, was a success. The Week was launched with the NATO - Armenia Youth Educational Rally, featuring the departure of a NATO bus that traveled from one end of Armenia to the other giving presentations at seven university towns outside of Yerevan. The week concluded with a sometimes emotional digital video conference (DVC) between Armenian peacekeeping troops in Kosovo and their family members in Armenia. In between, there were numerous other events, including a roundtable hosted by the Embassy for NATO ambassadors with NATO Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy Jean Fournet as the guest speaker. The events received wide media coverage, especially the DVC. If the publicity did not entirely banish the skepticism shown by many Armenians over joining NATO, it certainly went a long way toward ensuring that Armenian public is better informed about NATO's objectives, values and activities. End summary.

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STUDENT TOUR AROUND THE COUNTRY PUBLICIZES NATO  
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2. (SBU) Charge d'Affaires Anthony Godfrey helped kick off "NATO Week" by speaking to a group of enthusiastic Armenian youth at a rally in Yerevan held by the Armenian Atlantic Association (AAA) as part of its NATO awareness campaign, which was funded largely through a Democracy Commission small grant. Several young members of AAA then took off in a bus and, in the course of five days, traveled from one end of Armenia to another, speaking to university students in seven cities in the region. The group ended "NATO Week" back in Yerevan for a concluding ceremony.

3. (SBU) The response outside Yerevan was more NATO-skeptical than in Yerevan. We attended the AAA-led discussion in Vanadzor, where the students at Dimitric University were quite skeptical about NATO and about the value of Armenia's international engagement generally. The students were suspicious of NATO's anti-Soviet past and the fact that Turkey is a leading member of the Alliance. By the end of the discussion, the AAA discussion leader had made some--but far from complete--headway in persuading participants that Euro-Atlantic institutions offered value for Armenia. This discussion was an important way for the students to hear a positive message regarding

NATO's mission and core values.

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DVC CONNECTS ARMENIAN PEACEKEEPERS WITH THEIR FAMILIES  
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¶4. (U) The U.S. embassies in Yerevan and Pristina, together with the Armenian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense, organized an extremely successful digital video conference that connected 23 Armenian peacekeepers serving in Kosovo with their families in Armenia. The soldiers, most of whom were away from home for the first time, were very excited to see their friends and families for the first time in four months. At one point, when a soldier who formerly served in Kosovo was reconnected with his fellow peacekeepers, the soldiers and families all broke out into song. The video conference was opened by the U.S. Charge d'Affaires and FM Vartan Oskanian. Oskanian, who was scheduled to leave after his opening remarks but chose to stay for the entire hour, made a point of thanking the USG for the DVC, calling it a "very precious gift." We would like to thank U.S. Office Pristina for the wonderful job they did arranging their side of the DVC.

¶5. (U) The DVC not only connected Armenian soldiers with their families, but the emotional event was also viewed on television throughout the country. Public TV, Armenia's most popular television station, MC'ed and recorded the event. The station aired footage on their news program that evening, and broadcast a separate half-hour long segment on prime time the following evening. In addition, Public TV compiled and copied DVDs with footage of the video conference, which the embassy delivered to a number of other local television stations, resulting in broad television coverage of the conference.

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ROUNDTABLE WITH AMBASSADORS FROM NATO COUNTRIES  
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¶6. (SBU) The Embassy also organized a March 16 roundtable that

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brought together NATO members' ambassadors to Armenia. During the meeting, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy Jean Fournet, who was in Armenia to mark NATO Week, sought the ambassadors' opinions on how to improve NATO's image in Armenia. Fournet told the ambassadors that public diplomacy in Armenia was especially important because it was part of the goal of explaining NATO's role to people in the countries surrounding Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Russia.

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CSTO SECRETARY GENERAL VISITS ARMENIA DURING NATO WEEK  
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¶7. (SBU) The visit to Armenia of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Secretary General Nikolay Bordyuzha during NATO Week was an interesting confluence of events. During his visit, Bordyuzha said that Armenia was an active member of the CSTO and saw its security as being protected within the CSTO framework. According to BBC's Caucasus Monitoring agency, comparing the CSTO with NATO, Bordyuzha said that NATO was created more than half a century ago and has developed a major public diplomacy effort. The BBC reported that Bordyuzha said that the CSTO cannot conduct a similar public diplomacy campaign, but that it is making some efforts at increasing public awareness of the organization.

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COMMENT  
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¶8. (SBU) While a November, 2006, IRI poll showed that almost half (43 percent) of Armenians supported NATO membership for Armenia, it was clear from AAA's meetings with students that much work remains to be done. Our experiences observing the AAA discussion groups suggest that NATO skepticism may remain more deeply entrenched outside of Yerevan--even among the upcoming generation of youth whom we might otherwise expect to be more NATO-friendly. NATO Week in

Armenia made concerted progress towards increasing public knowledge of NATO, and hopefully towards building support for the Alliance. The DVC, which reached Armenian television viewers throughout the country, appears to have been an especially effective means of helping to build support for Armenia's continued participation in international deployments and cooperation with NATO.

GODFREY